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CO-OPERATION OF ALL DEPARTMENTS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH COMPOSITION¹

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The subject of co-operation in the teaching of English composition is comparatively new, it is tremendously important, and it is one which English teachers cannot profitably discuss by themselves. In saying that the subject is new, I do not mean to imply that no experiments have been tried or that there is no record of them. On the contrary, there are several documents which the seeker after educational experience may consult. For example, the New England Association of Teachers of English has published from time to time accounts of the efforts of its members to solve what one writer calls the problem of "Successful Combination against the Inert." But as compared with the question of electives or vocational guidance, for example, the field is virgin soil.

I speak of the subject as tremendously important. So I believe it to be; no doubt my readers share that opinion—or will do so on a moment's reflection. For we are here concerned with habits almost if not quite the most significant which any individual possesses, namely, language habits. No one will deny that the mastery of the vernacular is the supreme achievement of social beings, and probably no one will deny either that there is no other mastery so difficult, requiring as it does adjustments finer and more complicated than those demanded by any other aspect of human behavior. Moreover, these adjustments begin in early infancy, are operative during every waking hour, and have fairly established themselves by the time a child enters the high school. If now the pupil speaks and writes and reads well, it is necessary only that the new environment foster a growth well begun, not hin-

¹A paper read before the Secondary Department of the National Education Association at Salt Lake City, July 9, 1913. To appear later in "*Social Administration of the High School*," by Charles Hughes Johnson (Scribners).

der it or destroy it. If, however, the entering student has made small progress in language or has accumulated a stock of bad practices, to save him will require the united efforts of all the teachers he may meet. How profoundly true this is appears in the doctrine, now widely accepted, that language habits are special, not general; that proficiency in a given situation offers no positive assurance that we shall find it in another. To illustrate from our common experience, pupils often express themselves well in the English classroom and very badly elsewhere. It is in a sense true that unless all instructors teach English it is nearly useless for any to do so. Hence, co-operation deserves our most serious consideration.

DIFFICULTIES TO BE OVERCOME

By co-operation in English we mean the working together of all the teachers of a school to secure, on the part of their students, the correct and effective use of oral and written expression. We have glanced at the necessity of this; let us now consider with some care the difficulties which any plan of co-operation will involve.

1. *Uniform standards.*—There can be no progress in co-operating in English teaching so long as some departments support by example, or are at best indifferent to, language which others condemn or, what is equally destructive, while some departments offer no positive stimulus to accurate and adequate expression in speech and writing. It may be that the teacher of English is overprecise, a purist, and prizes too little the plain and straightforward expression of the results of observation and thought. It may be that the teacher of science prides himself on his freedom from conventionality and has scant respect for good usage. It is, at any rate, more than likely that each goes his own way, quite unfamiliar with the attitude of the other, and as a consequence the pupil finds it easy to choose the path of least resistance.

One reason for such a state is the overspecialization of students in the universities and of teachers in the high schools. It is now possible for a young man or a young woman to secure the Bachelor's degree, and with it a recommendation to a high-school position, without adequate training in the arts, acquaintance with the

humanities, or grounding in the sciences, as the case may be. The result is a high-school course made up of a series of unrelated units and high-school instruction in which each department not only fails to support the others but may even nullify their efforts. The teacher who knows neither science nor industrial art will make small headway in training a class to express their live interests, while the teachers of those subjects who know little English constantly offend good taste in language and signally fail to complete the training which the English teacher has begun.

A strong reaction against a one-sided preparation which can result only in mutual lack of sympathy and support, and which tends to disintegrate the life of the pupil instead of unifying and harmonizing it, has already set in. It may be desirable to require each teacher in the larger schools to give instruction in at least two departments in order to secure the necessary breadth and catholicity of interest. From the numerous suggestions which have come to my notice I quote the following, which is a part of a series of resolutions presented by a special committee to the Conference of High Schools with the University of Illinois in November, 1913.

All candidates for high-school positions should do work in English extending through at least two years, with emphasis upon oral and written composition. The committee is impelled to make this recommendation because of the deficiencies in English that so frequently characterize high-school teachers. The committee recognizes, however, that even the best technical training in English composition will not alone suffice to accomplish the desired results. In addition to this, every effort should be made in *all* classes to develop adequate habits of clear and concise expression, and to encourage effective standards of diction, syntax, and logical organization. We recommend that the Conference urge upon college and university authorities the importance of emphasizing this phase of education in *all* classes in which intending high-school teachers are enrolled.

The last recommendation is an interesting confirmation of the necessity of co-operation in English, even in the colleges.

2. *Common aims*.—But granting that the teachers of a school have been broadly and adequately prepared and that there exists among them reasonable agreement as to what standards of expression in language should be set up, difficulties will remain. Promi-

ment among these is that of setting up common aims. Overspecialization is the chief stumbling-block here also. The teacher of physics wants to make scientists and the teacher of English wants to make novelists, while both should be eager to make men. Neither has time, or will take it, to visit the classes of the other, and no common interests are discovered. Moreover, co-operation is very generally viewed as one-sided. It is supposed to be a device for giving English a large place in the program or, on the other hand, a means by which teachers of other subjects may unload their manuscripts and escape the grind of correcting them. These objections must be removed before the necessary willingness to co-operate can be secured.

It is not the business of the science teacher to give instruction in the principles of English composition. That subject has its proper technique, and instruction in the technique of composition requires skill born of experience, as in the case of any other sort of instruction. It will be sufficient if the science teacher will but require his pupils to employ to the full whatever command of language they possess. So far as correctness is concerned, it is certainly true that high-school pupils rarely make mistakes out of ignorance. They know what is right but fail to follow it. This all teachers must insist that they do and, like Goldsmith's village preacher, practice it themselves. Teachers in departments other than English need not fear encroachment, then, for it is demanded only that they require the pupils to use the knowledge they possess. This doctrine may, however, be too narrowly interpreted. Many proceed on the supposition that co-operation in English means merely correcting bad grammar, bad pronunciation, and bad spelling, with the possible addition of insistence on neat manuscript. These are certainly desiderata. "These ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone." Language is almost identical with thought. Meagerness, confusion, and inexactness of expression are fairly indicative of like qualities of idea. When all is said that can be said for those who think by means of images, objects, drawings, or what not, the fact remains that almost all of our thinking is done with words. Hence, when the teacher of geometry insists on crystal clearness of statement, he is really making sure

that the pupil grasps the idea; when the teacher of history requires the evidence on a point to be properly arranged and adequately set forth, he has really brought the individual and the class to a complete consciousness of the facts involved, has secured full knowledge where half-knowledge lurked before. As soon as all teachers understand this and act accordingly, our problem will be practically solved. As it is now, we divine what is passing in the pupil's mind, supply the words which he cannot find, and hasten on, with a resulting lack of thoroughness which is the most crying weakness of our schools. A few things properly mastered, a few steps carefully taken would result in more knowledge and better training than we now secure by our hurried attempt to orient the boy in his teens in all the formulated and predigested experience of the race. And there is no more efficient means of assimilation and mastery than complete, accurate, and adequate expression in speech and writing. Hence, the teacher of English should enforce a few simple principles of composition that will enable the pupil to plan and execute an oral report or paper in history or in science, and the teachers of those subjects should aid the pupil to secure such a grasp of the subject-matter as will make such reports and papers possible.

3. *Working conditions.*—But quite enough has been said about teachers. They are unable, however willing, to solve the problem alone. School officers and administrators must provide the necessary conditions. Suppose the English teacher meets a class of forty pupils each period of the school day. This is a situation somewhat worse than the average but it is by no means unknown. How, in that case, will he give sympathetic attention to the interests of his pupils so that their practice in speaking and writing may react favorably on their work in other classes? How will he attend carefully to the individual so that his grasp of principles may be assured? How will he retain sufficient energy to consult with his colleagues and devise plans of assault on particularly stubborn fastnesses of metropolitan polyglot or rural *patois*? We write a course of study for the English teacher and crowd it with literary masterpieces—thought important for those who will attend college. Then we demand more than twice as much work of him as he can

possibly do well and wonder why he does not succeed in vanquishing, single-handed, the foes of clear thinking and correct and clear expression which have been intrenched for years, and which can now command aid and succor from all sides during every waking hour.

As for teachers of other subjects, while they are not so grievously overburdened, yet they, too, are often under the necessity of hurrying through a heavy course, with too many pupils to be able to think of the possibility of dividing with someone else responsibility for mastery of the vernacular.

Ultimately the problem of co-operation is one for the principal, the superintendent, and the school board. It is primarily a question of economics. The task of providing a people's college in every town and section to which the humblest may freely go and in which he may receive instruction in almost every branch of human knowledge and training in every art known to man is greater than is generally realized. To make our already large investment pay we must more than double it. A fair question may be raised as to whether we are justified in diverting large sums for the purchase of equipment to turn out a few would-be engineers, for example, when we do not provide adequately for training all in the fundamental arts of life. At all events, it will require as much zeal and pride and generous outlay to secure notable results in English as in molding and turning, and the sooner this is realized, the sooner we shall get results.

In a given school, then, co-operation in English must be brought about by the principal. He alone can see the problem from all sides; he alone is free, or ought to be, from predilection for one activity or interest; he should see his boys and girls as developing beings with whole undivided lives; he is in a position not only to institute plans, but to see that they are carried out, and to judge of the results. Wherever any measure of success in co-operation has been secured, the principal has generally been the guiding force.

SUCCESSFUL PLANS

This brings us at last to the point where we can speak for a moment of a few successful plans. Most notable, perhaps, is that now in operation in the Cicero Township High School near

Chicago, Ill. This is a school in an industrial community. The parents are largely of foreign birth and not well to do. The pupils enter high school as much in need of training in the vernacular as any that can be found. What Principal Church is doing here will be done elsewhere—as soon as the importance of it is realized.

Mr. Church recognized the economic aspect of the problem and began reform by inducing his board to supply him with additional teachers. He has thus reduced the number of pupils assigned to a teacher of English to sixty. These teachers are on duty in their classrooms throughout the school day and afterward to deal with individuals and to discuss their oral and written work with them. The next step was to secure unanimity of effort in certain specific matters. This was attained by having the English teachers prepare a brief statement as to what other teachers might do to enforce the instruction they were giving; as, for example, the correcting of grammatical errors, the use, when appropriate, of full sentences, etc. Eventually, it was found desirable to issue a monthly bulletin by means of which each teacher might know what instruction in English was being given and might demand that it be observed in his recitations. It was agreed that all departments should keep a separate and distinct record of the quality of the English used by each pupil, and that the average of such marks should constitute 25 per cent of the composition grade given to the pupil at the end of the semester.

The effort is described by competent observers as wonderful. The entire school is pervaded by an atmosphere of good English, and the performance of the pupils, coming as they do from ill-educated homes, is comparable to that which may be found in the small, high-grade private school.

Another typical example of successful co-operation is to be found in the Boston High School of Commerce. The principal, Mr. O. C. Gallagher, describes their plan as follows:

To keep the pupils on the watch for accurate, effective, and smooth composition in all their work, they were informed that at frequent, though unstated, intervals their papers in other subjects would be corrected by their English teachers to ascertain their observance of the principles taught in the English classes. The marks thus obtained are entered upon the regular composition work, and unsatisfactory papers are revised or rewritten, the same as unsatis-

factory themes. In addition, teachers of other subjects are urged to send batches of papers whenever pupils seem to be growing careless—a condition that often prevails immediately after the correction of sets of papers in subjects other than English.

The teacher of the other subject demands that the work be clear and substantially correct in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. Failing to secure the first, he lowers the pupil's mark, and at his option, demands revision; failing to secure the second, he withholds all credit until the work is presented in a satisfactory form. The teacher of English insists that every piece of writing shall be regarded as an English theme to be corrected, revised, and rewritten, and to count in the making-up of the mark in English. The collection of papers at unexpected moments convinces most pupils of the un wisdom of taking chances; for even if the English teacher fails to collect a set the teacher of the other subject is likely to send him any piece of slipshod work.

Again, a conscientious attempt is made to teach pupils how to answer questions in other subjects. We correlate the English work in the first year with history; in the second, with commercial geography; in the third, with local industries and civil government; in the fourth, with business law and economics. By drawing upon these branches for occasional subjects, and correcting the themes orally for sentence structure, unity, mass, and coherence, we try to train the pupils to bear in mind the principles of English while their attention is focused upon another subject. Similarly in connection with science, descriptions of apparatus and expositions of experiments are required, and the teacher of science is consulted as to the adequacy of the productions from a technical standpoint. With foreign languages the English department has found most need for co-operation in drill upon points of grammar as they are taken up in German and in French.

Besides "corrective" co-operation, there is such a thing as "preventive or anticipating" co-operation, which is quite as important as the other. Since most teachers are interested in English as a means rather than as an end, the use of English must be made effective in recitation as well as in writing. Several subjects taken up in the first year of a secondary school lend themselves readily to such drill, especially history and elementary science. After consultation between the teacher of English and the teacher of history, the history textbook may be taken up in the English class, and the pupil taught how to make his English do the work that the author tried to have his do. What has the author aimed at? Did he hit it? Why? How? This brings the pupil to the outline; he must get his sights in line. Then the discharge—oral delivery. The class watch as markers, criticize the sighting, aiming, line of flight, and the hit. The aim is thus upon the English essentials of unity and coherence, in whole composition, paragraphs, and sentences.

The result is easier work for the teacher of history, for the teacher of English, and for the pupils, since the work in the English class is "a practical job."

The pupils can measure the success of their effort in one class by their achievement in the other.

Reports from several other schools embody some of these ideas and suggest a number in addition. One of the most striking is that of keeping pupils on probation in English throughout the course. Delinquents who have been warned and who fail to improve are remanded to the English department for such further training as seems necessary. This may result in the establishing of a sort of hospital squad. Naturally pupils wish to get out of the hospital as soon as may be. Sometimes it is possible to require those who persist in making mistakes in externals, such as spelling, to take a course in typewriting. Again, certain teachers or departments find it feasible to employ the same subject-matter for a part of the course. Science notebooks are made the basis of studies in sentence structure in the English class, pupils engaged in shopwork are taught how to organize notes on their projects in the form of analytical outlines, etc. The outside reading of the pupils is sometimes directed to lists of books which have been made up by all departments in conference, and care is exercised that only a reasonable amount of collateral reading be required of any pupil. Similarly the amount and distribution of written work is determined, the form of notebooks is agreed upon, etc. Of great importance is the compiling of a standard guide to the preparation and correction of manuscripts, which should reflect the practice of good publishers, and which should be in the hands of all teachers and pupils and consistently adhered to.

Various attempts have been made to work out a practicable method of grading so that due account may be taken of the value of substance on the one hand and externals of form on the other. Some years ago, Mr. G. H. Browne, head master of a preparatory school in Cambridge, Mass., established in his institution the custom of dual marking by means of a "numerator" and a "denominator." The mark above the line was to stand for substance in all papers, including those for the English teacher, while the mark below the line was to indicate excellence in "mother-tongue," that is, spelling, etc. Marks of the latter sort were sent in by all teachers, averaged, and reported to the parents. The effect is said

to have been immediate and gratifying. Lately the practice of holding occasional conferences at which a few papers are examined, corrected, and graded by members from all departments has been growing in favor. Marking has been further systematized in a few cases by the working-out of some sort of scale after the general plan of that invented by Professors Thorndike and Hillegas. These conferences are necessary and may be made the means of unifying and co-ordinating the activities of the different departments of a school to a remarkable degree.

To summarize: Co-operation in English composition, to be successful, must be organized and administered by the head of the school for the good of all. This will involve the setting-up of common aims and the establishing of suitable working conditions. Instruction in the technique of speaking and writing should be regarded as the work of the teachers of English. Teachers of other subjects should refuse to accept oral reports or written papers which are below the standards agreed upon. If the delinquent student fails to repair the deficiency, he should be reported to the principal and sent to the English department for further training. In matters of substance, particularly clearness and completeness, the teacher of each subject should point out the weakness, cause it to be removed, and apportion credit to the paper in accordance with the degree of success attained. By means of class visitation and conference, teachers of English and of other subjects should seek to join their efforts so as to accomplish the most effective training of the student in the arts of study and of expression with the greatest economy of his time and the most consistent unifying of his life.